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EFFECTIVE EDUCATION TO MEET SPECIAL NEEDS OF NATIVE CHILDREN.

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RURAL ALASKA IS COMPOSED OF VERY SMALL COMMUNITIES, A SITUATION WHICH COMPLICATES DEVELOPMENT OF ADEQUATE EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS. ELEMENTARY EDUCATION IS PROVIDED THROUGH A LARGE NUMBER OF RELATIVELY SMALL VILLAGE SCHOOLS. ALTHOUGH SOME OF THESE SCHOOLS ARE TOO SMALL, MOST PEOPLE AGREE THAT EDUCATING THE YOUNGSTERS IN A BOARDING SCHOOL SITUATION IS NOT DESIRABLE. SINCE IT IS NOT FEASIBLE TO OFFER A COMPREHENSIVE HIGH SCHOOL PROGRAM IN EACH SMALL VILLAGE, IT BECOMES NECESSARY TO ESTABLISH AND OPERATE SECONDARY BOARDING SCHOOLS, WHICH ARE BETTER ABLE TO MEET THE NEEDS OF THE YOUNGSTERS. THE BUREAU OF INDIAN AFFAIRS, WHICH OPERATES THESE BOARDING SCHOOLS, HAS ADOPTED THE FOLLOWING EDUCATIONAL GOALS BY 1970--(1) 90 PERCENT OF THE NATIVE YOUTH TO GRADUATE FROM HIGH SCHOOL, (2) 50 PERCENT OF THE NATIVE HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES TO ENTER COLLEGE, AND (3) 50 PERCENT TO GO ON TO SOME OTHER KIND OF POST-HIGH SCHOOL VOCATIONAL TRAINING. THIS ARTICLE APPEARS IN THE "JOURNAL OF AMERICAN INDIAN EDUCATION," VOL. 3, NO. 3, MAY 1964, PP. 21-25. (ES)

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Robert L. Bennett and L. Madison Coombs

One cannot speak meaningfully of the place of adult education in the total education program of the Bureau of Indian Affairs without defining the goals of the total program. Stated in the broadest terms, this goal is to help people move, in terms of knowledge, understandings and skills, from an ancient culture into that of the modern world. This must be done in a greatly shortened period of time with due regard to and respect for the virtues of the old culture, and that the reason it must be done is not because the Bureau of Indian Affairs or the State or any other agency of government decrees it but because the inexorable circumstances of life require it and because basically, however reluctantly, the native people wish it. It does not do much good to debate the question of whether the old culture or modern culture is best; change is an inevitable fact of life, affecting all people, native and non-native alike.

What have some of these changes been? First of all, the native population is increasing each year and this is true in most of the individual villages. The population is increasing mainly because with the help of modern medical science we do not let the babies die in such great numbers as they once did, and we prolong the life span of native people of all ages. No one is about to suggest that we stabilize the native population by letting babies die or by withholding from native people the best that medical science can offer. But as the population increases the subsistence economy upon which native people have depended since time immemorial does not increase but rather tends to decline. In most communities the hunting, fishing and trapping is not what it once was. Besides, the modern world, with consumer goods in forms as processed foods and modern appliances, intrudes even to the most remote villages. This kind of economy calls for money, and money means wages. While the Bureau is trying its best to institute a money economy in villages, there is a limit to what can be done in this direction. The conclusion seems inevitable then that many young people must leave the native villages to seek their livelihood and live their lives in larger communities. It is the job of the Bureau of Indian Affairs to help prepare them to do this.

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We cannot be sure whether you are familiar with *An Over-all Education Plan for Rural Alaska,* developed by a select committee appointed by Governor Egan as a result of a meeting held in Washington, D. C. in February of 1962, attended by officials of the State, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. The report was submitted to the Governor in May of last year. It was my privilege to serve on

the committee. The report faces and analyzes the problems of educating rural youngsters and proposes some remedial action. While the Bureau of Indian Affairs may not fully subscribe to the plan in all of its particulars, especially some of the inferences which are drawn, it has accepted it as a basis for future cooperative planning. The plan envisages a number of regional boarding high schools to be operated by the State, begining with one at Nome, to be followed by one in the Kodiak-Kenai area, with, perhaps, Mt. Edgecumbe eventually serving the Southeast Alaska region.

Going beyond the over-all plan, however, it would be most helpful to us to develop with you and others in the State deeper understandings of the problems involved in the education of native children and youth, particularly in the more remote rural communities; but, perhaps to a lesser extent, in the larger communities as well. We believe that the interests of all native children in the State would be served by such an exploration. It is most interesting to us in the Bureau of Indian Affairs to note that only fairly recently has the educational profession and the public at large become more fully aware that culturally disadvantaged children have very special educational needs which can not be met in traditional ways with conventional programs. Now one hears much about what is stirring in our large cities and in such rural regions as Appalachia. The Bureau of Indian Affairs has been struggling with this problem for many years.

To begin with, rural Alaska is composed of very small communities. Because of transportation difficulties, there is no prospect in the foreseeable future for the consolidation of schools such as has taken place in most of the other states. It seems manifestly clear to us that in such small communities education at the elementary level must continue to be provided through a quite large number of relatively small village schools.

The only alternative to this would be to send young children away from their homes to boarding schools, which no one, including the Bureau of Indian Affairs, advocates. It goes without saying that such village schools need to be of the highest quality possible, with adequate modern facilities and qualified teachers of real talent. The education of children in these communities, many of them non-English speaking when they come to school and all of them with limited experience in modern culture, presents a teaching challenge of the greatest magnitude. On the positive side, most of these children are bright, pleasant, and eminently educable. It must be recognized, however, that in most cases neither the home nor the community is able to make that contribution to the child's learning which most schools have matter of factly come to accept. So, in such communities an even greater burden devolves upon the school than is normally the case.

In those communities in Alaska in which the Bureau of Indian Affairs hold responsibilities for education, we are moving ahead at a fairly satisfactory rate in providing adequate modern facilities. The Congress has been generous with funds, and we estimate that we are about half through the job of "catching up" on inadequate and obsolete facilities, although the job of "keeping up" will continue.

Most of our teachers, though not all, are qualified and a large proportion of them are dedicated and talented. Nevertheless, we must redouble our efforts to recruit a uniformly well qualified corps of teachers.

With respect to education at the secondary level the situation presents a different set of problems, we believe. By virtue of their small populations,

it is not feasible to try to offer a comprehensive high school program in most of the villages. We are not persuaded that the minimum high school will provide native youngsters with the scope and quality of education which they must have if they are to compete successfully in the modern world outside the villages. This judgment is based on the conviction that our objective is to give native youth an education which will permit them to live and work in larger communities if that is what they desire. We are concerned with providing an opportunity for native people to make choices, and an individual who has no option but to remain in his native community because of lack of training is not truly a free person.

The alternative, then, to small minimum high schools, correspondence courses, etc., in our smaller communities would seem inescapably to be boarding high schools or dormitory facilities in connection with already existing public high schools. The State has taken cognizance of this in their planning for regional boarding high schools, albeit on a limited basis. We are aware that boarding schools are unpopular in many quarters. Many native parents, quite understandably, would prefer that their children attend high school at home, or at least closer to home than is now possible. Other persons, particularly the non-natives, inveigh against "segregated" boarding schools and stress the salutary effects of native children attending integrated high schools. There can be no disagreement with this position as a general principle, but there are some more subtle considerations at which we need to take a hard look. First, the transfer of schools from Federal to public school auspices does not constitute integration in fact if the composition of the student body remains substantially unchanged. Second, while the attendance of native children in public schools with non-native schoolmates can and should have beneficial effects, the reverse can easily be true if the special learning needs of under-acculturated native children are not recognized and met. We have seen this happen in more than one instance throughout the country. On the basis of experience, we cannot accept the judgment, as is sometimes implied, that our boarding schools at Mt. Edgecumbe, Wrangell, and Chemawa, Oregon, are not doing a good job with native students. It is our considered judgment that they come as close to meeting the educational needs of native students as any schools in the State. We offer the following information in support of this statement.

The unpalatable fact is that many native children, upon completion of eight years of elementary schooling in either BIA or State schools, are not ready to handle high school work of the normal level of difficulty. Furthermore, they are likely to be from one to three years older than is normal for their grade level. Were these pupils to enter a traditional high school program they would almost certainly fail and drop out. At both Wrangell Institute and Chemawa Indian School we have differentiated our curriculums by such means as ungraded elementary programs and multi-tracks which permit many students to "catch up" to the point where they can handle normal high school work. For other pupils at Chemawa, a terminal program is provided which will permit the acquisition of basic communicative, numerical, and social skills and some marketable vocational skills which will permit them to earn a better living than would otherwise be possible. Other eighth grade graduates *are* able to handle normal high school work. The entire Mt. Edgecumbe enrollment of 660 is composed of such students. We have a group of 90 able 9th graders at Wrangell and an increasing number of Chemawa students are taking work at the high school level. These are not "watered down" programs. They are accomplished by planned learning activ-

ities which go on 16 hours a day, 7 days a week, for 9 months of the year and by unremitting attention to the special needs of these students.

We believe that these programs are beginning to pay off with some rather dramatic results. According to a survey which we make annually in cooperation with the public and private school people of the State, in 1955-56 there were only 54 Alaska natives pursuing education beyond the high school level. Last year, 1962-63, there were 571, an increase of more than ten fold in eight years. Of the 571 in 1962-63, 250 were graduates of a single high school, Mt. Edgecumbe. The great majority of the 571 were receiving financial support of one kind or another from the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Eight years ago a mere handful of Alaska native students were taking college level work; last year there were 174 of whom 109 received BIA grants-in-aid. In 1955-56 few, if any, Alaska native students were attending the BIA's post-graduate vocational school, Haskell Institute, at Lawrence, Kansas; last year there were 107 and this year there were even more. Eight years ago the BIA did not have an Adult Vocational Training Program; last year 209 young native adults were helped to obtain vocational training through this program. We do not offer these figures in a spirit of self-congratulation, but only because we believe they are extremely significant and not generally known.

The Bureau's educational goals for 1970 are:

1. 90 percent of native youth of the appropriate age to graduate from high school.
2. 50 percent of native high school graduates to enter college.
3. The remaining 50 percent to go on to some other kind of post-high school vocational training.

This is moving in the right direction. Today we are faced with the disconcerting fact that a four-year terminal vocational course is no longer adequate to prepare young people for an increasingly sophisticated world of work. We no longer attempt to do it in our Bureau high schools. Our offerings at Mt. Edgecumbe, for example, are at the practical arts and prevocational level and presuppose that graduates will go on to further training. More than 80 percent of the Mt. Edgecumbe graduates do so; either to college, Haskell Institute, or under our Adult Vocational Training Program. We do agree that vocational education programs in communities the size of Fairbanks or Anchorage have enormous advantages in terms of on-the-job training, etc., than those attempted in smaller communities.

In this connection, however, we note with considerable discomfort preliminary evidence of the failure of a large percentage of native students in our largest public school systems in the State to complete high school. Each year the State Department of Education routinely provides us with statistics of native enrollment and graduates in all of the State and District schools in Alaska. This report indicates, for example, that in one school system, during the 1962-63 school year, a total of 534 native children were enrolled in all grades, 154 of whom were at the high school level. It also shows that only 7 native students received high school diplomas. A first impression is that these figures, if accurate, reflect an alarming rate of dropout.

The figures from the other large districts are not substantially different, although those from the smaller high schools are somewhat better. We realize,

of course, that 1962-63 may not have been a normal year and that dropout studies, other than those conducted longitudinally, are hazardous. We raise the question, however, and we should be pleased to learn more about it.

Last year all District and Rural schools in the State, with a total enrollment of 1,253 native high school students, graduated 172 students. By comparison, Mt. Edgecumbe alone, with a total of 670 students, graduated 118, an unusually small class. This year with about the same total enrollment they will have a graduating class of about 170.

In conclusion, the Bureau of Indian Affairs believes, as it has believed for a good while, that one of the best hopes for adequate high school opportunity for native Alaska youth from our rural communities lies in boarding facilities in our larger centers of population, such as Fairbanks or Anchorage, in addition to those already mentioned. We believe these children should attend the public school system in an integrated situation with appropriate arrangements for State and Federal financial support. We believe the University of Alaska should be involved with respect to educational research and teacher training. We believe that the larger community has much to contribute to the education of children quite outside the school itself. But we believe that such a program, unless it were designed to compensate for the cultural disadvantages from which native children from remote communities suffer, would have a limited prospect of success. We are also convinced that our Bureau, and public school people as well, must do a better job than we have thus far done in interpreting to native parents the specific reasons why a changing world will increasingly require more education for their children.

Now what about the place of adult education in this? The education of native children and native adults, including the parents of the children, must go together.

It is pointed out that children cannot be educated successfully out of context with the understandings, expectations, and aspirations of their parents for them. For many years those of us in the BIA have told native parents that they should send their children to school and keep them there until they finish, but we have not done a very good job of telling them why. We make speeches to each other about the effects of automation on employment, and we have convinced ourselves that common labor is disappearing from the market, and we know that—to be employable—persons in the future will need to have a much higher order of skills than they have had in the past, but we have not done a good job of trying to interpret these sweeping changes to the parents of our children. Often native parents have kept their children in school for no better reason than that they have wanted to please us. That is not a good enough reason. We must start spelling out to native parents and other adults in specific terms the real concrete reasons for the increasing need for education. We have found that where there is a good adult education program the community interest in the school program for children almost invariably increases.

Finally, we need to be sure that an atmosphere is created where people can flourish and achieve their aspirations.